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ABSTRACT

The development of a college writing program can offer many challenges to a program director drawn from the ranks of the English faculty. The discipline of writing, an act of production, is both scorned and clutched by faculty who have been trained to analyze literature, an act of perception. Literature specialists, to be qualified to teach writing, need to study the composing process and to attack every aspect of writing and the teaching of writing with creative and inquiring minds. In addition, the director of the writing program should have training in rhetoric to develop an intellectually sound writing program and should address a variety of program-planning tasks, including the proper placement of freshmen in writing courses, the designing and implementing of a freshmen sequence of writing courses, and the training of part-time faculty and graduate assistants. A program director should also involve members of the college faculty on a composition committee to act as formal advisors. A writing director acting alone will accomplish little of lasting value, but with the support of the English department and the university administration, a director can initiate a writing across the curriculum program, install a solid placement program for English education majors, and have a clear say in the selection of new writing faculty. (AEA)

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The Development of a Writing Program: Obstacles and Possibilities

by

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Let me begin by painting a rather absurd picture. Suppose a literature program exists somewhere with, let's say, one faculty member out of twenty in the program formally qualified by training to teach literature and the rest trained to teach History. These History specialists may have a genuine love of language, they may enjoy reading novels and even attend poetry readings, but one could hardly call these demonstrations of good will and interest adequate preparation for giving college students formal training in the discipline of literature.

Suppose, too, that these History professors scorn all attempts to learn anything about literature, insist that there is nothing to learn, and accuse the literature specialist of talking through his hat when he suggests that there is intellectual content to literature, that there is a body of scholarship to be pondered and mastered, that there are exciting developments in the discipline.

Consider further the nature and extent of the problem for the person charged with getting a decent literature program going when the History faculty on the one hand refuse to learn about literature and on the other hand insist that the History department must continue to teach it. (Every freshman is required to take six hours of literature and the History department needs a strong FTE showing.) To further compound the problem these History faculty solve their own dilemma by relegating the teaching of freshman literature to part time instructors or to graduate students. And their notion of the literature specialist's job is to make the part-time people and the graduate

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assistants shape up and in general to do all the housekeeping necessary to dull the senses to the annoyance of having to deal with literature at all. The literature specialist is for all practical purposes a glorified work-study student. Those of us who know and appreciate literature would say of such a situation that it is an affront to the discipline of literature and to the professional and intellectual integrity of literature faculty.

Without exaggeration, one can say that a comparable situation faces Directors of Writing. Just as literature was both scorned and hugged by the History faculty in the foregoing fictional example, so is the discipline of writing both scorned and clenched tightly by literature faculty in our Departments of English.

At this point perhaps one should say in all fairness that there is some justification for this ambivalence of English faculty toward the teaching of writing. English faculty have been trained to analyze the finished pieces of the works of novelists, poets, dramatists, and of the great prose writers. They essentially train students to perceive ever more and more clearly the component parts and the characteristics of literary products, and literature students can and do become quite adept at literary analysis.

Analyzing literature is an act of perception, however; writing on the other hand, is an act of production. The writing teacher must be informed about the principles established by research -- and not by conjecture -- which underlie and inform the composing process as it meanders toward finished product. Literature teachers or English faculty in general have not studied the composing process. Instead, they are victims of the heritage passed on by Adams Sherman Hill and those other occupants of the Boylston Chair at Harvard in the 19th and early 20th centuries -- a heritage marked by prescriptive attitudes toward writing and by an extreme preoccupation with grammatical correctness which in turn resulted in such dubious contributions as the "doctrine of the paragraph"

and the "doctrine of the topic sentence." The one qualification of English faculty for teaching writing is that they have a commitment to doing so. The advertisements in The Chronicle up to about a year ago attest to that. But the commitment often becomes moribound when tenure is granted. To say that a Ph.D. in English automatically qualifies one to teach writing is just as ridiculous as saying that a Ph.D. in History qualifies one to teach imaginative literature.

Some English faculty who try hard to make sense of their writing classes will offer to students the testimony of accomplished writers about writing, not knowing that doing so is to engage in the fallacy of natural logic. These great writers invariably tell us only what they remember of their writing process; they do not address the totality or the universality of the process for all writers. Other English faculty resort to the mechanical use of handbooks and to the teaching of editing. No wonder they find the teaching of writing a boring and futile task. And others in an effort to put some "content" into the writing course, and to save their own sanity, add or sneak in a literature component. But, still others, refuse to get locked into those teacher mind-sets described so well by Mina Shaughnessy in her classic book Errors and Expectations -- the mind-sets of "guarding the tower" and "converting the native." Instead they seek to understand why college students are not making measureable progress in writing; they "sound the depths" -- to use a third Shaughnessy mind-set, and having first acknowledged that there is a problem and that it is the duty of English Departments to address that problem, they proceed to attack every aspect of writing and the teaching of writing with creative and inquiring minds and not with a newer edition of the old handbook and with one more choice of reader. Most of the significant scholarship in the field of writing in the last twenty years has been done by English faculty such as these -- faculty

with Ph.D.'s in literature. These faculty retrained themselves. Unfortunately their numbers are scant when compared to the total number of English faculty teaching writing.

How would one then describe the ideal situation for the teaching of writing and the ideal setting for developing a writing program? In the ideal situation, faculty who teach writing would be trained or retrained in writing, would normally be products of Ph.D. programs in Rhetoric and Writing. While all of the faculty would have some knowledge of all areas of writing, individual faculty would have their specializations; some would be specialists in writing theory, some would be specialists in composing research and some in cognitive development, some in linguistic research, some in testing and evaluating, some in classical rhetoric and several in modern rhetoric, some in business and technical communication. And the department overall would reflect a balance of these specializations. But since the ideal exists for the most part only in the fantasy worlds of Directors of Writing, the question must be asked and faced, "How can one go about developing a viable writing program under present conditions?"

To begin with, the Director of Writing should have training in Rhetoric. It is crucial that the Director capitalize on the initial good will of the Department and its Head, and make judicious and maximum use of the honeymoon period at the beginning of his/her employment. And it is important that the Director move on many fronts. If the Director is serious about developing an intellectually sound writing program, he/she will have to address 1. the proper placement of entering freshmen in writing courses, 2. the designing and implementation of a solidly developed freshmen sequence of writing courses, 3. the training of part-time faculty and graduate assistants, 4. the re-education if possible of as many as possible of the full time faculty through workshops and faculty development grants, 5. the designing and implementing of upper division writing courses solidly informed by writing theory and

research, 6. the offering of at least a minor in writing, 7. the academic preparation of English Education majors who are going out to the high schools to teach writing, 8. the development of some means of having faculty across the University use writing in all courses, 9. the exploration of ways and means to bring to the attention of English faculty the ongoing research in the discipline of writing, and 10. the need to insist on having something to say about the qualifications of faculty -- full-time or part-time -- who are hired to teach writing. The task is huge.

While the bleak picture painted earlier of the attitudes of English faculty toward writing is generally accurate, there will usually be two, three, or four of those faculty who are willing to get directly involved to improve the writing program. They get involved because of their goodwill, their recognition that something needs to be tidied up in the writing program, and their willingness to enhance their own teaching of writing. Usually, these faculty are very active in their own specializations and are held in high regard by the rest of the department, and usually they don't know what they are in for. It's important that the Director determine as quickly as he/she can who these faculty are and insist with the Department Head that they be allowed to act as formal advisors to the Director. One very good means of accomplishing this is to have them serve on the Composition Committee. Then, the Director can set the Composition Committee the task of addressing first those aspects of the writing program which are causing visible annoyance; those aspects invariably have to do with the freshman program: the part-time instructors, and the general sense of chaos. If the Composition Committee can succeed in giving even the appearance of order to the program, there is relief throughout the department.

The Composition Committee will need to look carefully at the freshman writing courses and redesign them if necessary. Having done so, the imperative of the proper placement of entering freshmen, the imperative of providing guidance

and workshop sessions for the part-time faculty and the full-time faculty will loom large. In the process of attending to these concerns the Composition Committee is educating itself and developing rather strong convictions about writing and the teaching of writing; it very quickly develops a sense of ownership of the program and in so doing, projects that ownership on to the department. The department then must deal with a rather formidable Composition Committee not just with the Writing Director, and because the Department has to recognize that the work of the committee is substantive and solid and not merely cosmetic, it will be hard pressed to articulate a rational argument against the committee's work. This is not to say that some faculty will not advance irrational arguments.

The establishment of a solid base of not just support for a writing program but of active engagement on the part of key faculty in addressing writing concerns in the context of up-to-date information on the scholarhip in the field is in my judgment at the heart of any potentially successful effort to deal in any adequate sense with the teaching of writing. The Writing Director as Lone Ranger can accomplish little of lasting value. Improvement in the teaching of writing and in the overall quality of the program occurs not in the Director's office but in individual classrooms.

While the Composition Committee plods along developing the writing curriculum first at the freshman level and then at the upper division level, recognizing and insisting that writing is not only a skill but that it has primary intellectual content because it is about language and the use of language, the Director can be and ought to be initiating moves on a number of other levels and in a number of other areas.

While it is important that the English Department view writing as central to its concerns and not as an irritating appendage, it is also important that the faculty across the University give writing the time and the care it should have in their courses and that the Administration give to writing

the attention and the money it deserves. The faculty will not be moved by simple and repeated exhortation, nor will they be bullied; they have to develop conviction through knowledge. Because college and university administrations are eager to do all they can to resolve the writing crisis, the Writing Director already has their ear and need only supply workable suggestions for getting a Writing Across the Curriculum program started. If the Director also makes available timely and substantive reading material on such program, the Administration in due course will be ready to move with its authority and with some money. Again, it will be important for the faculty to develop a sense of ownership of any such program. The Director will need to figure out ways and means of accomplishing that. It will be wiser to start with a few interested faculty and work from there.

The Director also needs to get a solid placement program installed as soon as possible and to make some immediate impact on the curriculum for English Education majors. As long as English faculty send out to teach writing graduates who are not academically qualified to do so there can be no great suprise at the level of literacy skills of entering freshmen. Finally, the Director has to insist on having a clear say in the selection of new faculty who will be teaching writing.

Clearly, in a college or University which takes its writing program seriously, the Director should not have to try to do everything; there should be at the least an Assistant Director and qualified Office help. The task of getting a sound writing program started is huge, so huge that one wonders why anyone would want or take the position of Writing Director. Perhaps it is because Directors know that research and scholarship are on their side and that so, too, is the national momentum. English departments who do not open themselves up to the "winds of change" in writing are unwittingly creating serious problems for themselves.

From my own experience as a Writing Director who is working with a Composition Committee to develop a writing program, I can say that along with the inevitable frustrations of the job, there are rewards and significant satisfactions. There is also one overriding conviction, a conviction articulated by Maxine Hairston at the 4 C's last month in San Francisco (March, 1982): Those of us English faculty who are interested in developing a writing program worthy of the name cannot be cowed by the condescending attitudes of so many of our English colleagues, cannot allow ourselves the luxury of getting angry at well meaning colleagues who won't read the research, cannot permit our attention and spirit to wither in the face of those endless political games which exhaust so much valuable time in academe. We must instead keep our sense of humor; we must demand the best of ourselves. We must keep our commitment to the discipline of writing and to our students no matter what, so that by the sheer dint of our perseverance, a writing program worthy of the name will indeed gradually evolve.